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ABSTRACT

Collaborations between universities and schools can yield many benefits for both partners, but even in the best collaborations, some problems cannot be resolved easily. This paper describes the experiences over several years of one university-school collaboration, exploring the nature of collaborations that attempt to both restructure schools and provide high-quality opportunities for teacher preparation through Professional Development School (PDS) activities. The paper begins with background information on the university and inner-city school involved in the collaboration and the origin, purposes, and evolution of the program. The paper then discusses the change process, describing the slow process of building trust between the university liaison and school staff. Positive, permanent changes that occurred through 6 years of the collaboration are described, including the hiring of a full-time school social worker and full-time parent coordinator, having a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) course moved to the school's new parent resource room, and changes in the school's instructional program to become more child-centered. The paper concludes with reflections on the collaboration and complex change process, offering nine lessons grouped into three categories (Necessary Knowledge, Teacher Needs, and Research Priority) that are critical to such collaborations. Contains 11 references. (Author/EV)

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The Restructuring of an Urban Elementary School: Lessons Learned as a Professional Development School Liaison

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Abstract

Collaborations between universities and schools can yield many benefits for both partners, but even in the best collaborations, some problems cannot be resolved easily. This paper describes the experiences over several years of one university–school collaboration, exploring the nature of collaborations that attempt to both restructure schools and provide high-quality opportunities for teacher preparation through Professional Development School (PDS) activities. The paper begins with background information on the university and inner-city school involved in the collaboration and the origin, purposes, and evolution of the program. The paper then discusses the change process, describing the slow process of building trust between the university liaison and school staff. Positive, permanent changes that occurred through 6 years of the collaboration are described, including the hiring of a full-time school social worker and full-time parent coordinator, having a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) course moved to the school's new parent resource room, and changes in the school's instructional program to become more child-centered. The paper concludes with reflections on the collaboration and complex change process, offering nine lessons grouped into three categories (Necessary Knowledge, Teacher Needs, and Research Priority) that are critical to such collaborations.

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Introduction

After 6 years of working in a successful university–school collaboration with an inner-city public school, first as part of a funded restructuring project and then as a Professional Development School (PDS) liaison, the reality set in that we were no longer newlyweds. After many new initiatives and steady improvement, we had evolved into an odd couple dedicated to the task of educating 465 children. Some of the issues and concerns that arose were the result of real differences between the university and the school; others were caused by conflicts between a restructuring school and existing

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central office policies. We came to the realization that even in the best of collaborations, some problems cannot be resolved easily, neatly, or maybe at all.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of university–school collaborations that attempt to both restructure schools and provide high-quality opportunities for teacher preparation activities.

Program Description

The School of Education (SOE) is a member of the Holmes Partnership and is accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). While teacher preparation is a graduate undertaking leading to a Master of Teaching degree, students may enter a 5-year program as freshmen and complete two majors and two degrees, or they may enter as graduate students provided they have an undergraduate degree in the humanities and sciences. The program requires students to do some of their clinical work in inner-city, urban settings.

The funded project was a university–school collaboration based on the premise that an "academy" approach, one in which groups of individuals come together for training and return to train colleagues in their school community, is a viable vehicle for instituting reform in urban elementary schools. The academy model made use of intensive staff development opportunities to empower teachers, parents, administrators, and community members to become part of the decision-making process.

Restructuring was based, at least partially, on a model developed by James Comer (1980) and his associates at Yale University that supports the participation of teachers, parents, and community members in the management of the schools. Site-based management, shared decision making, community involvement, and developmentally appropriate practice were all project priorities. While restructuring initially focused on training leadership teams, individual schools were charged with providing appropriate professional educational experiences for faculty and staff. Each school had a Staff Development Committee that was responsible for planning and evaluating monthly, half-day programs. Topics were chosen by the school faculty and included three types of presentations: those designed for a school-wide audience, those designed for grade levels, and those of interest to individual teachers.

The school where I worked is in a neighborhood with a high incidence of violent crimes including murder, assault, and drug abuse. The school building houses programs for 4-year-olds through fifth-graders, and all of the children qualify for participation in the Chapter 1 program. The teachers are experienced, dedicated, and willing to go the extra mile to insure that children have every opportunity to succeed. Many describe their teaching assignment in missionary terms; they are concerned with saving the children. Turnover is relatively low, with two to three teachers replaced yearly. Retirements account for most staff changes.

During the fall of the second year of the project, we began to explore the possibilities of the school becoming the university's first Professional Development School site. The discussion began with members of the School Planning Management Team (SPMT) and continued through late spring. At the end of the year, the superintendent and the dean of the SOE signed a memorandum of understanding establishing the school as a PDS.

The third year of the partnership began a combination PDS–restructuring process, with both operating as one initiative. The training focus of the project at that point was on competitive mini-grants for which each school developed a school improvement plan. My school's proposal tied cooperating teacher training to instructional improvement by stressing ways in which student teaching and practicum placements would benefit both the children and university students.

As we sought to advance the joint program, both sides—the school and the university—worked carefully to ensure that toes were not trampled and that everyone understood the expectations for each new activity; our unwritten theme was "no surprises." It was not long before we were forced to acknowledge that if the collaboration was going to grow, there were some critical issues that needed attention.

As in most schools, the teachers possessed a range of abilities; some were excellent, some competent, and some in the process of improving their skills as part of intensive staff-development opportunities. Generally, teacher educators want their students exposed to only the best models available. However, the school's teachers were protective of their own and resented any suggestions that some of their colleagues' teaching skills were less than desired. At the same time, the classroom teachers had no trouble refusing the professional development services of a university professor who they felt was overly critical of their school system.

When we discussed the fairness of a process in which the teachers could refuse the services of a professor, but I could not make judgments about the suitability of some teachers, they understood the dilemma. The teachers simply felt that colleagues were family, and you made allowances for family members. Over time, this issue was resolved by instituting a requirement for 25 hours of training before a teacher could accept a student teacher. As it turned out, none of the questionable teachers ever applied for the training, and the collaboration dodged a potentially lethal bullet.

The Change Process

Throughout my assignment, the university connection was able to provide services and opportunities to the school that were not previously available. For example, I was able to obtain free basketball tickets from the university so that hundreds of children could attend games as part of school-sponsored field trips. We visited a PDS that was sponsored by another university, conducted a seminar at a Governor's Conference on Education, and presented a session at an American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) conference. Together we wrote year-end reports, analyzed the building for safety concerns, and improved the climate with paint, color, plants, and new lighting. While all of these are legitimate activities that made the teachers and students feel good and cemented my relationship with the school, they were all relatively safe because none addressed the crux of restructuring: improved teaching and learning. Improving instruction proved to be a long, slow process.

From my many years of experience as a consultant, I recognized that some teachers would be reluctant to ask for assistance because they would not want to be seen as being incompetent. In order to alleviate these concerns, the teachers and principal agreed on a policy that I would not enter a classroom unless I was invited (except in rooms where

there was a student teacher), and any requests that teachers made for assistance were not to be recorded or shared in any way with the principal or anyone else unless the teacher decided to do so. Within the first semester, about 80% of the teachers invited me into their classrooms and provided an opportunity to discuss the children, goals, content, instruction, assessment, and/or behavioral problems. Some teachers asked for advice; others let me work with a small group. Still others wanted to talk about the restructuring process, the intent of the grant, or why I was willing to spend long hours in their school. "Are you writing a book?," "Is this a research study?," and "What are you getting out of this?" were commonly asked questions. For the most part, they were asked without malice in a legitimate, professional way, and frankly they were questions that I would have asked if placed in their position.

It was early in the third year of the project that a teacher with a combined second- and third-grade class asked me to work on a long-term project. She had mentioned to one of the practicum students that the classroom organization model she had used for years was not working. Children seemed to be on top of each other. The room was generally crowded and noisy and felt out of control. The student told her about some organization ideas that she had learned in my class the previous semester, and subsequently the teacher decided to ask for my assistance. After a number of discussion sessions spent exploring possible reasons for the problems, we decided on a three-stage project. First, the room and storage closets would be cleaned out. Second, we would co-teach a 2-week unit on working together and group problem solving. And third, the children would help to develop a new room arrangement.

The project took about 7 weeks from beginning to end. Teachers would stop to see what we were doing, and I probably earned as much respect for washing shelves and carrying out trash as I did for teaching the children. For the first few times we taught together, the teacher was a little anxious about teaching with a "professor," and I was a little anxious about teaching her children. During the third session, we were comfortable enough to laugh with the children and each other, and from then on it went fairly smoothly. The children arrived at some design ideas that were incorporated into the room arrangement (others really weren't workable). The culminating activity was a moving day when the children actually rearranged the room. Their responsiveness and the teacher's endorsement of the process opened the door for four additional teachers to request assistance that year.

Program Changes

Positive, permanent changes occurred throughout the 6 years. Many of them required lengthy deliberations to arrive at a consensus position that could be embraced by all of the constituent parties. While there were a great number of successful initiatives, some were particularly beneficial to both the university and the school.

The hiring of a full-time school social worker and full-time parent coordinator provided services to children, parents, and teachers that were not previously available. Before restructuring began, the social worker had divided his time among three schools. His efforts were given to eligibility hearings and to truancy and abuse cases that ended up in family court. When he became full-time, he was able to add staff development, classroom instruction, and prevention activities to his duties. In addition, he was available to consult with students and faculty, and he regularly made presentations to

university classes and student teaching seminars. His presence served to provide a buffer between teachers, emotionally charged parents, and children in crisis.

The parent coordinator was responsible for parent education, parent involvement, and community activities. Prior to restructuring, the school had a weak PTA with few members and even fewer participants. There were no parent education programs and no opportunities for parent involvement anywhere in the building. The parent coordinator began by establishing a parent resource center with materials, furniture, and a coffee pot in an unused classroom. Because many of the parents were young, unemployed high school dropouts who were available during the day, the center became a gathering place for a small number of parents who walked their children to school. In time, as their trust in the coordinator grew, this group became the first classroom volunteers. At the same time, the coordinator worked with the previous year's PTA officers to develop a slate of officers and begin a membership drive. And while the first year's membership was small, by the third year the PTA had grown to over 250 members.

One of the most important accomplishments of the parent coordinator was having a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) course switched from a local community center to the parent resource room. Many parents spent two mornings a week working on their diploma and the remainder of the day as classroom volunteers. A second initiative, one that was requested by parents, was the scheduling of on-site classes to help them learn new parenting techniques. At various times during the year, a series of 1-hour parent workshops were presented to small groups who were concerned with finding new ways to raise their children. Often those who attended were single parents who were frustrated with being responsible for three or more children. The classes provided a network of support as well as the opportunity to learn skills.

Most of the university students assigned to the school were early childhood education majors who were required to take a course in working with parents. The parent coordinator became a prized guest lecturer and the parent resource center a favorite place for the students to visit.

A third area of change has been in the instructional program. After years of a compensatory approach that emphasized skill drills, the teaching/learning situation has become more child-focused. While there is still an emphasis on reading and math, there is also an emphasis on hands-on manipulatives, story reading, story writing, children's language, and the discovery process. Computers are available in each room and are used primarily for writing and research. Lastly, a portfolio assessment initiative has been adopted by the teachers as a way to augment the existing requirements for standardized tests. The portfolios are used to support the test scores or as evidence that problem areas have been addressed by the teachers and learned by the children. These three initiatives have brought the school's program more closely in line with what university students have been learning in their courses and have made the school a better place for clinical placements.

Reflections

Last year, a colleague took my place and is establishing his own way of operating in the building. My experiences have helped me to better understand the complexity of school change and have reinforced a personal belief that the needs of the people involved are as

important as the vision for restructuring. After 72 months on the job, I left with nine personal realizations about the change process that can be grouped into three categories: Necessary Knowledge, Teacher Needs, and Research Priority. While this is not an exhaustive list, these realizations seem to be particularly critical to school change and school–university collaborations.

Necessary Knowledge

1. No change ever takes place in a vacuum. An understanding of the inner workings of schools including the realities of bus schedules, budgets, state-mandated curriculum requirements, physical space limitations, and the political realities of superintendent–school board interactions are necessary so that no one is slighted and no policies or procedures are ignored. The reality of most change initiatives is that real power remains in school boards, central office staffs, and state authority (Guskey & Peterson, 1996). The question often comes down to what can be done within the context of existing regulations, rather than how the regulations might be changed. In referring to a study of the Coalition of Essential Schools, Muncey and McQuillan (1993) commented that most Coalition supporters were naive about the degree to which school reform could be affected by academic concerns and about issues of power and politics within their schools.

2. Most of the individuals who are working on reforming schools have little experience with the change process. Moreover, many of the reforms are visions or ideals that have to be operationalized by those serving in the schools. For teachers who have been given curricular scope and sequence documents their entire career, curriculum development is a complex and time-consuming task. For university faculty who teach curriculum theory, pragmatic concerns about resources, time, and standardized tests are often troublesome. New learning will have to occur among parents, administrators, and school board members, in order for the restructuring process to be successful (Wilson, Peterson, Ball, & Cohen, 1996).

3. An adequate timeline that permits teachers to become comfortable with different expectations and provides opportunities for teachers to individually determine how they will initiate the change process in their classrooms is essential. In general, the more extensive the change, the more time that is needed (Michaletz, 1985; Guskey & Peterson, 1996). In fact, Poole and Okeafor (1989) suggested that a timeline of 3 to 5 years is not unreasonable, a conclusion substantiated by the experience of the author. Even within a single school, consideration must be given to different rates of change, depending on the needs and interests of individuals, or we are likely to get no change at all (Adelman & Panton

Walking-Eagle, 1997).

4. Teaching people how to participate in school-based decision making, consensus building, and teamwork does not prescribe which issues they should address in School Planning Management Team (SPMT) meetings. It is difficult for members to stay on task without clearly defined values for student learning as a guide (Guskey & Peterson, 1996). Time has to be spent on the development of a mission, vision, and goals so that participants understand both the purpose and the organizational structure of the change process.

Teacher Needs

5. Investing in change is a daunting prospect for many teachers. They need to feel personal and professional ownership of the change process (Martin & Saif, 1985). Everyone concerned, even those who are critics of the proposed change, must be informed on a regular basis.

Often teachers want assurances from the administration that their efforts will be accepted and valued before they invest in a new approach to teaching and learning. Marsh and Jordan-Marsh (1985) suggest teachers need to feel that (a) the organization values and has a high priority for the proposed change, (b) the organization will reward eventual users, (c) a network of support and teacher assistance will be available, (d) there will be collegial efforts to implement the change, (e) there is enthusiasm for the change, and (f) there will be protection against potential enemies.

Because teachers generally spend their days confined to their own classrooms, opportunities for collegial interaction tend to be limited. Organizational structures designed to enhance teacher–teacher interaction and provisions for developing collegial support need to be built into the change process (Poole & Okeafor, 1989). In addition, staff development must focus on the social and emotional needs of teachers and not just on providing them with additional skills to enhance their teaching. No matter how much staff development is delivered, it is not until teachers actually implement a new approach that they have the most specific concerns and doubts. In fact, according to Guskey (1986), a change in teacher beliefs and attitudes is only likely to occur after changes in student outcomes are evidenced.

7. Restructuring schools is difficult; restructuring schools while implementing PDS activities makes it more so. Teachers want university students to see them as competent professionals. The nature of the change process is such that people are often

involved in implementing new ideas and are operating on a learn-as-you-go basis. It seems unfair for teachers to be assigned interns at a time when they are operating almost as novices themselves.

8. At many schools, a core of faculty members becomes active in the reform process, but their efforts often end up dividing the faculty (Muncey & McQuillan, 1993). It seems we expend a great deal of effort to get those on the sidelines involved, but we often forget that faculty leaders need emotional support in their new role as change agents.

Research Priority

9. The needs of the school always come before the needs of the university. There is never a time when a research-writing agenda takes precedence over curricular/instructional concerns. Because working in schools is not predictable in terms of process or outcomes, university faculty must be ready to postpone projects in order to address school priorities (Davis & Fox, in press).

Conclusion

Restructuring urban elementary schools is a process that works best when there are adequate resources to provide participants with the skills, knowledge, and understanding necessary to facilitate the change process in their own building. Change is a uniquely human activity that places extraordinary personal and professional expectations on teachers. It cannot follow a top-down approach, nor can it be planned in linear fashion where new accomplishments are expected as an everyday occurrence. The lessons learned by the author ultimately can be reduced to the importance of treating each individual school as a special case with needs unlike any other.

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